

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

An Appreciation by BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

[Excerpts from an address before the Republican Club of New York, February 12, 1909]

YOU ask that which he found a piece of property and turned into a free American citizen to speak to you to-night on Abraham Lincoln. I am not fitted by ancestry or training to be your teacher to-night, for I was born a slave.

My first knowledge of Abraham Lincoln came in this way: I was awakened early one morning before the dawn of day, as I lay wrapped in a bundle of rags on the dirt floor of our slave cabin, by the prayers of my mother, just before leaving for her day's work, as she was kneeling over my body, earnestly praying that Abraham Lincoln might succeed and that one day she and her boy might be free. You give me the opportunity here to celebrate with you and the nation, the answer to that prayer.

To have been the instrument used by Providence through which four millions of slaves, now grown into ten millions of free citizens, were made free would bring eternal fame within itself, but this is not the only claim that Lincoln has upon our sense of gratitude and appreciation.

Lincoln lives in the 32,000 young men and women of the Negro race learning trades and useful occupations; in the 200,000 farms acquired by those he freed; in the more than 400,000 homes built; in the 46 banks established and 10,000 stores owned; in the \$550,000,000 worth of taxable property in hand; in the 28,000 public schools existing, with 30,000 teachers; in the 170 industrial schools and colleges; in the 23,000 ministers and 26,000 churches. But, above all this, he lives in the steady and unalterable determination of 10,000,000 of black citizens to continue to climb, year by year, the ladder of the highest usefulness and to perfect themselves in strong, robust character. For making all this possible, Lincoln lives.

By the same token that Lincoln freed my race, he said to the whole world that man, everywhere, must be free.

One man cannot hold another down in the ditch without remaining down in the ditch with him. One who goes through life with his eyes closed against all that is good in another race is weakened and circumscribed, as one who fights in a battle with one hand tied behind him.

In Lincoln's rise from the most abject poverty and ignorance to a position of high usefulness and power he taught the world one of the greatest of all lessons. In fighting his own battle

up from obscurity and squalor he fought the battle of every other individual and race that is down, and so helped to pull up every other human who was down. People so often forget that by every inch that the lowest man crawls up he makes it easier for every other man to get up. To-day, throughout the world, because Lincoln lived, struggled, and triumphed, every boy who is ignorant, is in poverty, is despised or discouraged, holds his head a little higher. His heart beats a little faster, his ambition to do something and be something is a little stronger, because Lincoln blazed the way.

In so far as the life of Abraham Lincoln emphasizes patience, long-suffering, sincerity, naturalness, dogged determination, and courage,—courage to avoid the superficial, courage to persistently seek the substance instead of the shadow,—it points the road for my people to travel.

Like Lincoln, the Negro race should seek to be simple, without bigotry and without ostentation. There is great power in simplicity. We as a race should, like Lincoln, have moral courage to be what we are, and not pretend to be what we are not. We should keep in mind that no one can degrade us except ourselves; that if we are worthy, no influence can defeat us. Like other races, the Negro will often meet obstacles, often be sorely tried and tempted; but we must keep in mind that freedom, in the broadest and highest sense, has never been a bequest; it has been a conquest.

In the final test, the success of our race will be in proportion to the service that it renders to the world. In the long run, the badge of service is the badge of sovereignty.

Lincoln lives to-day because he had the courage to refuse to hate the man at the South or the man at the North when they did not agree with him. He had the courage as well as the patience and foresight to suffer in silence, to be misunderstood, to be abused. For he knew that, if he was right, the ridicule of to-day would be the applause of to-morrow.

May I not ask that you, the worthy representatives of seventy millions of white Americans, join heart and hand with the ten millions of black Americans—these ten millions who speak your tongue, profess your religion—who have never lifted their voices or hands except in defense of their country's honor and their country's flag, and swear eternal fealty to the memory and the traditions of the sainted Lincoln? I repeat, may we not join with your race, and let all of us here highly resolve that justice, goodwill, and peace shall be the motto of our lives? If this be true, in the highest sense, Lincoln shall not have lived and died in vain.